

7. FISHERIES



Introduction

Maryland law requires that all counties located on tidal waters include a Fisheries element in their comprehensive plan. This chapter focuses on the designation of areas for loading, unloading, and processing finfish and shellfish, and for docking and mooring commercial fishing boats and vessels.

Goals and Objectives

To support the long-term viability of fisheries in Worcester County, a focused strategy is needed that balances economic development strategies with the preservation of working waterfronts and existing marine activity. Key objectives include maintaining commercial marine zoning at the West Ocean City (WOC) Harbor to protect it from residential encroachment, encouraging sustainable aquaculture as an economic supplement and a tool for enhancing water quality, and thoughtfully integrating tourism by promoting secondary attractions that complement—rather than compete with—core commercial marine activities.

Specific goals and recommended actions have been identified as critical to fulfilling recommendations and supporting the ongoing success of fisheries in the County:

1. Preserve Working Waterfronts

- *Action Item 7.1.1:* Maintain the West Ocean City Harbor as a commercial harbor and explore opportunities for compatible tourism development.
- *Action Item 7.1.2:* Protect seafood landing and processing facilities through zoning and land-use incentives.
- *Action Item 7.1.3:* Sustain fisheries and recreational fishing through water quality and habitat protection measures.
- *Action Item 7.1.4:* Enhance water quality initiatives to ensure long-term sustainability of local fisheries.

2. Support Aquaculture

- *Action Item 7.2.1:* Encourage sustainable aquaculture to supplement traditional fisheries and promote water quality improvements.
- *Action Item 7.2.2:* Promote aquaculture, including fish, clam, and oyster farming, to support the local economy.
- *Action Item 7.2.3:* Invest in sustainable aquaculture research and development, including new methods for fish, clam, and oyster farming.

3. Tourism Integration

- *Action Item 7.3.1:* Develop secondary tourism attractions around the harbor to complement commercial marine activities without compromising their primacy.

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- *Action Item 7.3.2:* Explore opportunities for compatible tourism development at West Ocean City Harbor.
- *Action Item 7.3.3:* Promote recreational fishing opportunities through marketing campaigns targeting regional anglers.
- *Action Item 7.3.4:* Create a regional marketing cooperative with commercial watermen to sell local products directly to consumers (for example, a fish market).
- *Action Item 7.3.5:* Develop tourism initiatives around commercial fishing to create additional revenue streams.

Commercial Fishing

Worcester County has a strong connection to commercial fishing, given its proximity to the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. The County is home to some of Maryland's most prominent seafood operations, particularly in communities such as Ocean City. These operations process types of seafood including blue crabs, oysters, and finfish.

Commercial fishing boats have Federal fishery catch quotas that require their harvest to be landed in a Maryland port. These catches, which are processed and sold in Worcester County by Southern Connection Seafood and Martin Fish Company, have an annual market value of more than \$3.7 million (2022).

Worcester County has more than 15 public boat ramps that provide access to local waters for both recreational and commercial fishing. The County also has several private and commercial docks, especially in and around Ocean City.

The Ocean City Inlet allows smaller vessels to travel between the Atlantic Ocean and coastal bays. Most commercial boats moor in the West Ocean City (WOC) Harbor, which is adjacent to the inlet. The WOC Harbor enables commercial fishing operations to offload their catch, and it also features dedicated facilities for seafood processing and shipping.

Within this harbor, the County hosts the annual "Harbor Day at the Docks," a waterfront festival which celebrates the County's rich history and maritime heritage, as well as sport fishing and commercial fishing industries. The harbor's commercial fishing buy operations also host Maryland's horseshoe crab bleed operations, generating necessary products used by drug and medical device makers to test for dangerous impurities in vaccines, prosthetics and intravenous drugs. The bleed operations are a key supplier of the state's biopharma and life sciences companies, which is key sector of Maryland's economy.

Besides the County's commercial marine facilities located in the West Ocean City Harbor, there is another commercial marina supporting watermen and aquaculture efforts in the Coastal Bays. The Baywater Marina in Snow Hill, perched on the shores of the Chincoteague Bay, is the only commercial marina located south of the Ocean City Inlet north of the Virginia state line.

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These commercial marina areas accommodate businesses that supply and cater to marine activities and needs. The County is a destination for boating, both for people who choose it as a place to dock their boat and for people who visit and perhaps would like to rent or charter a vessel for recreational purposes. Opportunities abound to enhance these destinations, grow local businesses, and increase outdoor tourism.

Promoting and Protecting the Seafood Industry

Charter boat services accommodate visitors looking for the opportunity to fish, crab, or cruise the waters of the Coastal Bays, the Atlantic Ocean, and the County's rivers. Within the Maryland Land Use Article, there is a requirement for counties located on tidal waters to include a Fisheries Element that designates areas on or near tidal waters for the loading, unloading, and processing of finfish and shellfish and for the docking and mooring of commercial fishing boats and vessels. Such areas are geographically located to facilitate the commercial harvesting of finfish and shellfish and to ensure reasonable access to the waterways by commercial watermen.

Given the historical significance of the seafood industry to the County's economy and to its culture, several locations within Worcester County meet these criteria. An indicator of the importance that the County places on ensuring and promoting the survival of the seafood industry was the establishment of our Commercial Marine District in the West Ocean City Harbor. Noting the critical need to preserve and protect Worcester County's commercial fishing industry, the County Commissioners established the Commercial Marine (CM) district and adopted sectional rezoning maps for the area in 1999. In the resolution approving this change, the Commissioners noted that "the commercial fishing industry has substantial historical, cultural and economic values for Worcester County and its protection is critical." Not only does the commercial fishing industry play a key role in the overall health and diversity of Worcester County's economy, but the CM district that receives the fleet's catch is a part of the required justification for federal maintenance of the Ocean City Inlet.

Tourism

Near WOC harbor is the site of the world's largest billfish tournament, the White Marlin Open. The White Marlin Open is a 52-year-old deep-sea fishing tournament that is incredibly important to the area's history and has a large impact on the local economy. In 2023, this annual tournament generated 130 jobs, attracted 3,500 anglers, and awarded roughly \$10.5 million in prize money. In addition to the thousands of participants, the event also brings in thousands of spectators.

Worcester County's commercial and sport fishing industries depend on the commercial marine support provided in and around the WOC harbor, the only harbor in Maryland with direct access to the Atlantic Ocean.

Challenges

While the County supports commercial fishing licenses and operations, it faces challenges from seasonal and supply fluctuations, state regulations, and pressures to rezone. Despite the current access points,

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CM District establishment and processing facilities, the County's seafood industry may face challenges with its ongoing viability as a sustainable business sector.

Offshore wind projects are one such threat. Another is the extent of dredging needed to keep the Ocean City Inlet and the federal channels open to the Atlantic Ocean and Coastal Bays for commercial fishing operations. Silted-in channels can prevent access or cause circuitous routes for the commercial boats to access the Ocean and Bays raising operational costs. While the current Maryland Coastal Bays Report Card has a grade of B-, declining water quality and habitats will continue to be a threat to the County's fisheries.

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